

Hiring a locksmith

Regardless of whether you are locked out of your car or home, you need new locks installed, or you require other security work, the following are tips for hiring a reputable locksmith.

Non-emergency situations

- Ask family or friends for recommendations.
- If you find a locksmith in the phone book, on the Internet, or through directory assistance, and a business address is given, keep in mind that some disreputable companies list street addresses to give the impression that they are local or that they operate out of an actual building at the stated address.

If being local is important to you, ask questions about the business location before hiring a locksmith.

Questions to consider asking:

- Where is your business located?
- Is your location an actual building?
- How long have you been operating in that location?

- Where were you located before?
- How long have you been in business?
- Some legitimate locksmith companies may not include a street address in their listing because they either operate a "mobile" business or they operate their business out of their home and may be reluctant to list that address.
- Write down what you are told. Not only could it help you make a decision, but it could also provide information should the locksmith turn out to be disreputable.
- Contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection to inquire about complaints on file. Also, contact the Better Business Bureau (www.bbb.org, 800-273-1002) to get the companies rating.
- If a company answers the phone with a generic phrase like "locksmith services," rather than a company-specific name, ask for the legal name of the business. If the person refuses to tell you, call another locksmith.

- Beware of offers for multiple discounts, emergency service promotions, claims of lowest prices, "No. 1" self-ratings and other puffery (exaggerated praise in advertising or publicity).
- Get an estimate for all work and replacement parts from the locksmith before work begins. If you can get a written estimate, that is even better. In cases of "lock-outs" (being locked out of your car or home), most legitimate locksmiths will give you an estimate on the phone for the total cost of the work.
- Once the locksmith arrives and has the chance to inspect your lock, ask if the estimate given over the phone has changed. If it has, you may want to seriously consider getting a different locksmith.
- In the case of a lock-out, be cautious if you are told up front that the lock has to be drilled and replaced. An experienced legitimate locksmith should have the appropriate tools and education to provide quality service to unlock almost any door.

- Ask about additional fees before you agree to have the locksmith perform the work. Companies may charge extra for responding to a call in the middle of the night. Ask if there is a charge for mileage, or a minimum fee for a service call.
- Find out if the locksmith is insured and ask the name of the insurer.

Write it down if you can. If your property is damaged during a repair, or if faulty work leads to loss or damage, it is important for the locksmith to have insurance to cover the cost of their mistake.

- Never sign a blank form authorizing work.
- Do not pay for service in advance and always ask that parts that are replaced be returned to you.
- When the locksmith arrives, ask for identification. A driver's license is best because it contains a picture and other information, like the state that issued it whether it is expired or not. Also ask for a business card.

Check to see if the invoice includes the company's name, and whether the locksmith's vehicle has a name that matches the business card, invoice, and/or bill. Also check for any discrepancies between the invoice, the business card, and the identification.

- Expect the locksmith to ask you for identification, as well.

- After the work is completed, get an itemized invoice that covers parts, labor, mileage, and the price of the service call.

Emergency situations

- If you are locked out of your car and have a roadside assistance service, call them first. These services sometimes are included with the purchase of a car, or as an add-on through your insurance company. You also can buy this service separately. Roadside assistance plans often have a list of pre-approved companies to perform services like unlocking cars, jump-starting batteries, changing flat tires, delivering gasoline, and towing.
- Do as much research as you can before choosing a locksmith.
- Follow the tips for non-emergency situations. They are just as important in emergency situations.

Next time

Once you have found a reputable locksmith, keep the company's name and contact information in your wallet and address book at home or at work. You also may want to program this information into your home and cell phones. This can save you time and trouble the next time you need these services.

Resolving problems

If you have a problem with a locksmith, try to resolve the dispute with the company first.

Make sure you act quickly. Some companies may not accept responsibility if you fail to complain within a certain time.

For more information or to file a complaint, visit our website or contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection.

Bureau of Consumer Protection
2811 Agriculture Drive
PO Box 8911
Madison WI 53708-8911

E-MAIL:
DATCPHotline@wi.gov

WEBSITE:
datcp.wi.gov

(800) 422-7128

FAX: (608) 224-4677

TTY: (608) 224-5058

(Some information taken from the Federal Trade Commission fact sheet, "The Keys to Hiring a Reputable Locksmith", February 2008.)

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